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CRDEC-TR-88157

**INHERENT BIAS
IN NONLINEAR LEAST SQUARES ANALYSIS
OF FIRST-ORDER KINETIC DATA**

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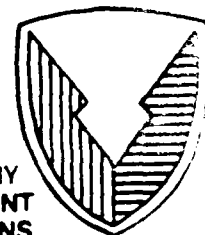
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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED			1b RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS		
2a SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY			3 DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.		
2b DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE			5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		
4 PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S) CRDEC-TR-88157			5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		
6a NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION CRDEC	6b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) SMCCR-RSC-C		7a NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION		
6c ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD 21010-5423			7b ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		
8a NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION CRDEC	8b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) SMCCR-RSC-C		9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER		
8c ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD 21010-5423			10 SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS		
			PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO. 1L162706	TASK NO. A553F
			WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.		
11 TITLE (Include Security Classification) Inherent Bias in Nonlinear Least Squares Analysis of First-Order Kinetic Data					
12 PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) Knier, Barry L., Ph.D. (University of Puerto Rico), and (continued on reverse)					
13a. TYPE OF REPORT Technical	13b. TIME COVERED FROM 85 Jun to 86 Sep		14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 1989 June	15 PAGE COUNT 11	
16 SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION					
17 COSATI CODES			18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP	First-Order Kinetics		
15	02		Decontamination, Error Analysis,		
07	03		Least Squares Analysis, Catalysis		
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)					
<p>Generally, it is assumed in analyzing first-order kinetic data that the unweighted fit to the exponential function, $b[\exp(-kt)]$, is superior to that of the logarithmic function, $\ln b - kt$. A careful analysis shows that this conclusion is not justified. In addition, a comparison of fits of actual data to both functions demonstrates that the methods are essentially equivalent.</p>					
20 DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS			21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED		
22a NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL SANDRA J. JOHNSON			22b TELEPHONE (include Area Code) (301) 671-2914	22c OFFICE SYMBOL SMCCR-SPS-T	

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SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

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PREFACE

The work described in this report was authorized under Project No. 1L162706A553F, CB Decontamination and Contamination Avoidance. This work was started in June 1985 and completed in September 1986.

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INHERENT BIAS IN NONLINEAR LEAST SQUARES ANALYSIS OF FIRST-ORDER KINETIC DATA

1. INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly popular to use an unweighted nonlinear least squares analysis to evaluate first-order rate constants.¹⁻³ The typical procedure starts with a data set t_i, y_i and fits it to a function

$$p_t = a + be^{-kt} \quad (1)$$

where p_i is the predicted (calculated) value of the measurement y_i . This is a relatively complex problem because the nonlinear fitting routine does not reduce algebraically (as does the linear version) so that various values of the constants a , b , and k are tried, and a minimum variance is sought. It is used in preference to its linear analog

$$\ln(y_i - a) = -kt + \ln(b) \quad (2)$$

because the experimental uncertainties of the y_i values do not transform linearly into \ln space. The uncertainty of $\ln(y_i - a)$ increases with time and in the unweighted procedure introduces a large potential error into the determination of k .

The shortcomings of the linear procedure are well known^{1,4-6} but no one has carefully examined the difficulties inherent in the exponential fit routine. There is the tacit assumption that, except for the mathematical gymnastics, the unweighted exponential fit routine is the perfect solution to the data analysis. Actually, it has the same difficulties as the linear case; they are just more deeply hidden.

The unweighted least squares procedure makes use of several assumptions. It assumes that all of the errors can be associated with one variable (y) and that errors are random (i.e., Gaussian). Goodness of fit is then determined by minimizing the sum of $(p_i - y_i)^2$, where p_i is the theoretical (calculated) value determined by substituting t_i into a trial

function [i.e., $p_i = f(t_i)$]. Practically a data set t_i, y_i is observed and matched to a calculated data set t_i, p_i .

Each term in the least squares sum

$$(y_i - p_i)^2 \quad (3)$$

is considered to be equally valid because each y_i is equally valid (i.e., has the same uncertainty). The problem arises from the first assumption: all the errors can be lumped into y . This implies that p_i is exact because it is calculated from t_i that is assumed to be exact. Because both t and y are experimental quantities, the validity of that assumption needs to be examined.

2. UNCERTAINTY ANALYSIS FOR LINEAR FUNCTIONS

For linear functions, there is no problem; and the assumption holds, viz.,

$$p_i = Ct_i \quad (4)$$

If each t_i is associated with an uncertainty u_t that is constant for all t_i , then the uncertainty of p_i (u_p) is given by

$$u_p = Cu_t \quad (5)$$

and is constant for all of the calculated p_i values; and each term of the least squares sum is equally precise.

3. UNCERTAINTY ANALYSIS FOR NONLINEAR FUNCTIONS

For nonlinear functions, the situation is more complex. For the exponential case, equation 3 becomes

$$p_i = b \exp(-kt_i) \quad (6)$$

If the uncertainty of each t_i (u_t) is constant, then the largest value that the calculated p_i can assume is

$$p_i \text{ (largest)} = b \exp[-k(t_i - u_t)] \quad (7)$$

$$= b \exp(-kt_i) \exp(ku_t)$$

and the smallest is

$$p_i \text{ (smallest)} = b \exp[-k(t_i + u_t)] \quad (8)$$

$$= b \exp(-kt_i) \exp(-ku_t)$$

Considering the error associated with p_i to be half the length of its error bar, then

$$2u_p = p_i \text{ (largest)} - p_i \text{ (smallest)} \quad (9)$$

$$= b \exp(-kt_i) \exp(ku_t) - b \exp(-kt_i) \exp(-ku_t)$$

$$= b \exp(-kt_i) [\exp(ku_t) - \exp(-ku_t)]$$

Since b , k , and u_t are constants, the bracketed factor is also a constant. Using A to represent collected constants, the net result is

$$u_p = A b \exp(-kt_i) \quad (10)$$

that, when compared to equation 6, becomes

$$u_p = A p_i \quad (11)$$

So rather than being a constant as is implicit in the normal application of the least squares analysis, u_p is a linear function of p_i or its experimental counterpart y_i .

Using relative values to relate to the chemical problem of first-order kinetics, y_i varies from 100-0%. Thus, points near 100% have twice the error as points near 50% and 10 times the error as points near 10%. Because the validity (i.e., appropriate weight) of a point relates to the inverse square of its uncertainty and because chemical reactions are typically followed for five half-lives (i.e., from 100-3%), this represents a serious problem for any type of unweighted analysis.

4. CONCLUSION

The problem relates to the change in slope (dy/dt) from a high initial value to zero at the completion of the reaction. During the first stages of the reaction, the concentration of the reactant, y , changes very rapidly. Any uncertainty of the time of a data point t in that region does not add any uncertainty to the y value of the point, but it does have a large effect on the corresponding p value because it is calculated directly from the time t . At later stages of the reaction where y is changing less rapidly, uncertainties in the time values add much less uncertainty to the calculated value of p . The net result is that the uncertainty of the t, y point is not constant for the duration of the reaction. No data analysis can be considered completely appropriate unless this is taken into account.

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